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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the sources of meaningful events across the lifespan. Both a quantitative approach and a qualitative approach were used to examine whether or not different measures reflected different domains of meaning and purpose. Subjects were 215 men and women, were classified in five developmental groupings: young adulthood (N=35), adulthood (N=47), middle adulthood (N=38), older middle adulthood (N=43), and older to "old-old" adults (N=50). The youngest subjects were from a community college and several of the oldest subjects were institutionalized in a nursing home, with the effects separated out. Subjects completed an interview schedule consisting of demographic data items and an open-ended questionnaire of reporting the most meaningful events in one's life with the age of occurrence. Subjects also completed a modified version of the Purpose-in-Life Test. The results revealed that the amount of meaning in a person's life did not seem to vary with age or gender. Similarly, what was meaningful to a person did not seem to alter with time. Work and love themes evolved as the most salient sources of meaning followed by births of children, miscellaneous quests, accidents/illness/deaths, separation/divorce, and to a lesser extent, major purchases. (Author/NB)

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Sources of Meaning Through the Lifespan[1]

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Running Head: Purpose-in-life (PIL)

Abstract

Two hundred and fifteen men and women at five developmental stages ranging from younger to older adulthood (17-96 years) completed several measures in order to assess the source and quantity of meaningful experiences in a person's life. The amount of meaning in a person's life did not seem to vary with age or gender. Similarly, what was meaningful to a person did not alter with time. Work and love themes evolved as the most salient sources of meaning followed by births of children, miscellaneous quests, accidents/illness/deaths, separations/divorces, and to a lesser extent major purchases. The results are discussed within the context of a life events perspective regarding the fundamental nature and extent of meaningful experiences.

Although meaninglessness has been thought of as the price paid for increased mechanization of society, recent concern for an individual's personal and subjective meaningful experience has become more and more an area of inquiry for clinicians. Traditionally the domain of philosophy (Arendt, 1971) social criticism (Becker, 1968; Lasch, 1986) and psychology (Frankl, 1978; Jackson, 1984; Klinger, 1977; Maddi, 1970; Stern, 1971; Stotland, 1969), gerontologists have begun utilizing the phenomenologically based approach of autobiographical or subjective experience of one's life (Breytspaark, 1984; Kaufman, 1986; Levinson, 1978; Prado, 1986; Rubin, Wetzler, & Nebes, 1986; Ryff, 1984; Whitbourne, 1986) finding salient lifespan experiences and themes.

Invariably, the salient themes of what is personally relevant and meaningful to a person unfolds when a research candidate is asked to account for his/her personal autobiography or subjective experience. This autobiographical technique of recounting salient themes is one which clinicians have long utilized in psychotherapy and marks an important moment for a closer bridging of the gap between research and applied. For instance, a clinical psychologist may be more concerned with how a person perceived an experience and its subjective meaning rather than the objective experience as it was observed by others.

Meaning is generally defined as making sense out of component parts of one's existence while purpose implies intention and goal seeking--the language for both terms is often used interchangeably and may be conceptually different. For example, theorists have suggested meaningful experience could be divided into religious events, metaphysical

occurrences, and existential conflicts, e.g., cosmic or terrestrial (Stern, 1971; Yalom, 1980). Klinger (1977) has suggested that a person is cognitively 'wired' with preattentive processes that currently concerns survival in meaningful ways, while Frankl (1978) has cautioned that meaning and purpose must be personally discovered and has more to do with searching for a goal (raison d'etre).

Previous empirical attempts to categorize meaningfulness resulted in vague concepts such 'growth', 'pleasure' and 'material goods' meaning (Czikszentmihaly & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Devogler & Ebersole, 1981; Klinger, 1977) without the advent of a gerontological lifespan frame.

Researchers have attempted to quantify meaning and purpose mostly relying on the Purpose-in Life (PIL) test scores (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964) and less popular tools. The degree to which a person currently experiences a sense purpose in their life has been related to psychosocial and physical well-being (Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987), but no indication of the sources of those meaningful experiences were addressed.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the sources of meaningful events across the lifespan. Both a quantitative (PIL) approach and qualitative (subjective experience) approach would be used to examine whether or not different measures reflected different domains of meaning and purpose. Age and gender differences, controlling in the older groups for institutionalization effects would also be investigated. Subjective and idealized ages of respondents were also included as previous research has demonstrated younger identified ages to be predictive of higher purpose in life scores (Baum & Boxley, 1983).

Method

Subjects

Two hundred and fifteen (N=215) men and women in approximately equal numbers at each of five developmental groups volunteered to take part in the study. The groupings were: young adulthood (17-24) (n=35), adulthood (25-39), (n=47), middle adulthood (40-55), (n=38), older middle adulthood (56-69) (n=43), and older to "old-old" (70+), (n=50). Participants were recruited through word of mouth in a large Midwestern city. The youngest subjects were drawn from a community college sample and several of the oldest subjects were institutionalized in a nursing home, with the effects separated out.

The sociodemographic profile of the young adults (Group I) can be described as completely single (100%); female (57%) of good (97%) health with high school (49%) or some college education (51%). They were Protestant (46%) or Catholic (37%) of medium religiosity (86%) and medium (69%) income.

The majority of the adults (Group II) were married (62%); mostly female (53%) and of good health (98%). Fifty-nine percent had achieved high school and part university level education with some 36% reporting graduate level training. Most were Protestant (55%), Catholic (36%) or Jewish (9%) of middle (55%) to low (36%) religiosity and of middle (72%) income.

Half of the middle-aged adults (Group III) were married (50%); 50% female and healthy (95%) reported good health status). Thirty-three percent had high school and part university level education and 68%

some graduate school. Mostly Protestant (68%) or Catholic (22%) Jewish (5%) or Other (8%) of middle (52%) level religiosity and middle (82%) level income.

Nearly one-half of the older middle-aged adults (Group IV) were married (49%); mostly female (58%) of good (77%) or fair (19%) health status. Education was more evenly distributed with 7% of grade school, 23% high school, 19% college and 44% some graduate school. Most respondents were Protestant (46%) or Catholic (40%), Jewish (2%) or other (5%) of higher (30%) medium (42%) or low (23%) religiosity. Most identified with higher (19%) or middle (60%) incomes.

Finally, one-third of the old-old (Group V) were married (28%), mostly female (56%) and in good (36%) or fair (52%) or poor (10%) health. Less than one-fifth had achieved only the eighth grade (14%); 42% had high school and (16%) part university. (Most (54%) were Protestant, or Catholic (36%) or Jewish (10%) of middle (46%) to higher (28%) religiosity and of higher (56%) incomes. The institutionalized (n=30) subjects were older (82.00 years) than their non-institutionalized (n=20) counterparts (77.95 years) and reported slightly worse health, less meaningful life events (3.31 compared to 4.30) and, in general, faired poorer, although these differences were not significant. The higher reported income for institutionalized subjects was spurious.

Instruments

An interview schedule consisting of demographic data items, and an open-ended questionnaire of reporting the most "meaningful events in one's life" with the age of occurrence, was included to add to the comprehensiveness as suggested by (Ebersole, Levinson & Svensson, (1987). In addition, a modified version of Crumbaugh and Maholick's (1964) original Purpose-in-Life Test (PIL) was included. The modified PIL (Chang & Dodder, 1984) is a 7-item, 5-point Likert type scale consisting of factorially derived dimensions, and has been well validated. Recent reviews have suggested Purpose-in-Life Test to be the best measure of generalized purposefulness (Dyck, 1987).

Procedure:

After visually screening for major impairments and physical disability by the principal investigator, participants signed an informed consent agreement and were asked to complete the interview schedule at their convenience. Snowball procedures were required for several subjects, although a large percentage of the subjects (88%) agreed on initial request to participate. The younger age groups were obtained from the 'captive audience' of community college sophomores who were asked to complete the interview schedule at the end of Introductory and Child Development classes. The institutionalized older adults accounted for all the remaining 12% rejections, and at times were read to and interviewed by the principal investigator. Data analysis was completed via SPSS.

Results

Means and standard deviations of all variables appear in Table 1. The chronological mean age of the sample was M=50.28 years old (SD 22.06), with the subjective age M=38.00 (SD 20.28) and ideal age M=40.14 (SD 14.92) were

12.00 and 10.12 years lower respectively. Total PIL scores were: M=30.00 (SD 5.41). PIL mean differences are as follows: Group I Men M=27.30 (SD 6.91) Women M=30.70 (SD 2.80); Group II Men M=31.20 (SD 3.20) Women M=30.12 (SD 3.73) Group III Men M=32.00 (SD 2.50) Women M=31.80 (SD 2.30) Group IV Men M=30.20 (SD 5.06) Women M=30.60 (SD 8.90); Group V Men M=26.51 (SD 6.20) Women M=29.51 (SD 5.90). There were no statistically significant PIL score differences per age group or gender. However, a t-test for PIL scores of observed differences between institutionalized M=26.13 (SD 6.26) and non-institutionalized M=31.35 (SD 4.60) respondents revealed significantly higher PIL scores for non-institutionalized older adults $t(48)=3.29$ $p<.01$.

(Enter Tables 1 and 2 About Here)

Correlations of all Purpose-in-Life scores by age and gender are arranged in Table 2. In general, chronological age ($r=.08$ $p<ns$) and gender ($r=.08$ $p<ns$) were unrelated to PIL. There were some significant correlations for men and women under age 40 and older than 24, but none were consistent across age or gender lines. Some moderate PIL correlations occurred: married ($r-.21$ $p<.001$), health ($r=.20$ $p<.001$), and number of meaningful events ($r-.26$ $p<.001$). Institutionalization was related to PIL ($r=.21$ $p<.001$), but only for women ($r=.52$ $p<.01$).

There were some significant male and female differences in subjective meaningful events. For the Total sample, Births of Children was consistently more important to women (22%) than to men (14%) $Z=2.75$ $p<.01$, while Miscellaneous Quests were more important to men (19%) than to women (12%) $Z=2.59$, $p<.01$. A further breakdown of individual age groups is as follows: Group I=Miscellaneous Quests: Men (50%) Women (21%) $Z=2.07$

$p<.05$. Group II=Work: Men (34%) Women (18%) $Z=2.12$ $p<.05$. Group III=Births: Men (7%) Women (22%) $Z=.60$ $p<.01$, and Accident/Ills/Death: Men (25%) Women (11%) $Z=2.31$ $p<.05$ and Group IV=Miscellaneous Quests: Men (25%) Women (5%) $Z=2.19$ $p<.05$. In Group V, there were no gender differences.

(Enter Table 3 About Here)

Percentage totals for meaningful responses and number of subjects responding is presented in Table 3. The response totals for all seven categories are as follows: For men, I=34, II=67, III=68, IV=79, V=68, Total = 316. For women, I=19, II=68, III=88, IV=95, V=120. Total = 392. For both groups: I=53, II=135, III=156, IV=174, V=188. Total = 708.

For the number of respondents, the following meaningful categories evolved: Work (Career/Educational pursuits) (73%); Love and Marriage (69%); Births of Children (58%); Miscellaneous Quests (49%), Accidents/Illnesses/Deaths (47%); Separations/Divorces (17%) and Major Purchases (9%).

(Insert Figure 1 About Here)

In addition, the average number of meaningful events was 3.31 (SD .92) and the events ranged between 25 and 43 years: Work (29.51), Love (25.87), Births (26.86), Miscellaneous Quests (27.25), Accidents/Illnesses/Deaths (43.34), Separations/Divorces (33.75), and Major Purchases (29.40).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the sources of meaning across the lifespan. Both objective measures of current meaning and subjective measures of sources were administered to varying age groups with the following results.

In terms of purpose in life (PIL), no age or gender differences were noted. Although other studies have found age (Meier & Edwards, 1974, Reker et al, 1987) and gender (Doerries, 1970, Reker et al, 1987) differences; specifically purposefulness increasing with age and women feeling more purpose in their lives, the research is far from consistent. For instance, the Reker (et al, 1987) study found age increased with purpose for only one of five dimensions of meaning (i.e., goal seeking and future meaning decreased with age). Other researchers (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Yarnell, 1971) have not found any age effects. Similarly, Reker (et al, 1987) found gender differences only on one of several dimensions (Will to Meaning); and the vast majority of researchers do not report gender differences per se (Crumbaugh and Maholick, 1964; Devogler-Ebersole and Ebersole, 1985, Meier and Edwards, 1974).

It is not surprising that age and gender effects are inconsistent if meaningfulness is based on life events and the construing of those events as relevant. That purpose and meaning are associated with increased levels of psychosocial and physical well-being intuitively makes sense in that it creates more opportunity for life events to occur. A sense of control has similarly been related to meaningfulness (Reker, et al, 1987) as has physical and mental health (Lieberman & Tobin, 1983; Reker et al, 1987), more confidence and self-esteem (Battista & Almond, 1973; Yarnell, 1971), belonging to more social organizations (Doerris, 1970); number of meaningful events (Devogler-Ebersole and Ebersole, 1985), and from this study higher subjective health, feeling younger and choosing younger ideal ages, more education, and marital status as married.

An inquiry into the most meaningful events in a person's life suggested seven common denominator themes. The two most salient themes were reminiscent of Freud's essentials--Work and Love. Invariably, subjects told of their lives as going through a type of educational/training program, graduating, getting married, etc. Births of children were addressed by the subjects, although there were significant differences between men and women. Not surprisingly in this culture, women thought that having a child was more meaningful than did men at a ratio of almost 2:1.

On the other hand, men felt that their miscellaneous quests, e.g., armed services, writing a book, etc., were more meaningful and important than did women. This is also not surprising in a culture which esteems independence for men more than women. Accidents/illness/deaths of significant family and friends next emerged as the most meaningful events in a person's life followed to a lesser extent by separation/divorce, and to an even lesser extent major material purchases.

Personal (Love and Marriage) relationships was the only category to receive consistent support in the research literature (Devogler & Ebersole, 1981; Devogler-Ebersole & Ebersole, 1985, Ebersole & Depaola, 1987; Klinger, 1977; McAdams, 1982; McCarthy, 1983), including marriage (Hedlund & Ebersole, 1983). Surprisingly, the findings of only one other study indicated similar percentage importance for Births (Ebersole & Depaola, 1987). Even more surprising was that very low percentages were obtained for Career (Devogler & Ebersole, 1981; Hedlund & Ebersole, 1983; Klinger, 1977) compared to this study's results. Inconsistencies in the importance of Miscellaneous Quests (Devogler & Ebersole, 1981) were also noted.

Differences, however, are likely to be a function of how the categories have been ordered. The Miscellaneous Quests category in this study included mostly religious experiences, travel, references to moves, armed services (War or the Great Depression) and miscellaneous material while others have not. And future researchers may wish to systematically order and make criteria for the events. For instance, religious practices are usually of low importance as are political/social/world events, that is wars or the Great Depression (Kaufman, 1986), yet some researchers have found religion/beliefs, etc. to be quite important if defined differently (Devogler & Ebersole, 1981).

Accidents/Illness/Death received a higher percentage here than in other studies. Devogler and Ebersole (1981) reported 7% while Ebersole and Depaola (1987), reported 22%. Again, the criteria problem may have been the cause. Divorce and major separations have been observed as meaningful (Doerris, 1970) but applies to a limited proportion of this sample. Other studies consider health important (Ebersole & Depaola, 1987; McCarthy, 1983) and this may have been included under the category "accident/illness/deaths". Material goods studied extensively by Czikszentimihalyi & Rochberg-Halton (1981) appear relatively unimportant to most age groups (Devogler & Ebersole, 1981; Ebersole & Depaola, 1987) and consistent with this study remaining less than 10%.

Several additional categories of Service to Others, Pleasure, Religion, Belief, and Growth, understanding that existed for Devogler and Ebersole (1981) or Ebersole & Depaola, 1987; or several of Klinger's (1977) categories such as "nature," did not occur. Consistent with Hardcastle

(1985) and other's work on gender differences, women tended to select relationships (relational) events. Reactions to "on or off-timing" of events was not examined, and could account for some differences. Future researchers may wish to examine the effects of such influences on meaningful events.

A common denominator for several of the emerging categories appears as separation-attachment themes. Bowlby (1980) has argued cogently that separation, attaching, detaching are the raison d'etre of existence and account for most of the variance explained in meaningful experiences. In this study, all categories: Love and Marriage, Births, Accidents/Illness/Deaths, Separation/Divorces, some aspects of Miscellaneous Quests. It may be that work is fundamentally meaningful due to the attachment of fellow workers and the co-working of goals. In any event, future researchers may wish to pursue the salient theme of meaningful attachment and bonding.

One surprising finding was that the meaningful life events occurred between the ages of 25 and 43 suggesting that there is a dearth of meaningful life events from age 43 onward. The fact that a life review process occurs in older adults may not be due exclusively to that cognitive process, but as a function of the lack of alternatives to uneventful and unmeaningful lives. Lazarus and Delongis (1983) have begun to address the role of meaning in life stress but much work for gerontologists remains to be done.

Contrary to the hermeneutical problem of understanding how meaning is recognized by a subject and transposed into their own value and meaning system, the findings of this study suggested meaningful experiences which

many share (cf. Jackson, 1984). A life events perspective has been advocated by some authors (Hardcastle, 1985; Hedlund & Ebersole, 1985). Atchley (1975) has proposed a life events model which could serve as a base for a lifespan model of meaning. Reminiscent of a decision tree, a branching out of the seven lines of meaningful life events e.g., work, births, deaths with developmental tracks toward meaningful experience could be suggested. A person may pursue one track e.g., love and marriage, or several tracks, simultaneously. At other points in the lifespan, he/she may be thwarted in some meaningful events such as illness of family member, but develop in lines of other pursuits, e.g., publishing a book. Are meaningful pathways equally weighted in importance? Could purposeful life events be compensatory or defensive if some are blocked? Do people engage in non-meaningful pursuits, who does, for how long a period of time and why?

Finally, there are several other theories of lifespan meaning beginning to develop. Kreitler & Kreitler (1987) have begun to investigate semantically the extent of meaningful dialogue. Kegan (1982) has investigated the dialectical parts of self and other as a developmental enduring of self. And although not specifically addressing development, Jackson (1984) and Sherman (1987) have argued for various aspects of self-esteem being compromised by lack of meaningful experience. And in this study and others (Devogler & Ebersole, 1981; Klinger, 1977) a lifespan view of meaningful events has been still another pursuit. Which of any or all the above are correct is not certain at this point in time, but offer important opportunities to examine the sources of meaningful experience in a person's life and perhaps offer the opportunity to help recreate a sense of purpose in those that have been devoid of meaning.

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Footnotes

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Percentages
of All Variables

Variable	M	SD	Percentage
Age	50.28	22.06	50%
Health	1.23	.47	79% (good) 17% (fair)
Education	1.90	.91	24% (high school) 33% (college) 35% 35% (post-college)
Gender	1.55	.49	--
Income	1.8	.59	26% (high) 62% (medium)
Marriage	.39	.48	39% married
Ideal Age	40.16	14.92	40%
Felt Age	38.00	20.28	38%
Number of Events	3.31	1.92	--
Purpose in Life	30.00	5.41	--

Note: Percentages do not total to 100% for some missing data.

Table 2

Correlations of Purpose in Life
by Age and Gender

Variable	Men					Women				
	I	II	III	IV	V	I	II	III	IV	V
Health	-	-	-	-.11	-.43*	.64***	-.05	-.36	.12	-.21
Education	.27	.09	.14	.09	.59**	.06	.10	-.09	-.18	-.19
Income	.17	.09	.00	.35	.04	.31	-.36	-.23	-.28	-.26
Marriage	-	.41*	-.04	.05	.29	-	.28	.16	-.02	.37*
Ideal Age	-	.28	.12	.15	.03	-	-.26	.05	-.24	.18
Felt Age	.17	.07	-.33	-.03	.06	.20	.28	-.37	.15	-.34
Number of Events	-	.36*	-.14	.42	.14	.08	.33*	.21	.48**	.12

* $p<.05$
** $p<.01$
*** $p<.001$

Table 3

Percentage Totals For Meaningful Responses
For All Age Groups
(N=215)

Most Meaningful Events		% of Subjects	% of Responses
WORK (CAREER/ EDUCATION)	M	.72	.25
	F	.73	.20
	MF	.73	.22
LOVE (AND (MARRIAGE)	M	.61	.21
	F	.77	.21
	MF	.69	.21
BIRTHS OF CHILDREN[a]	M	.39	.14
	F	.78	.22
	MF	.58	.18
MISCELLANEOUS QUESTS	M	.54	.19
	F	.43	.12
	MF	.49	.15
ACC/ILL/DEATH	M	.42	.14
	F	.52	.15
	MF	.47	.15
SEP/DIVORCES	M	.13	.04
	F	.22	.06
	MF	.17	.05
MAJOR PURCHASES	M	.06	.02
	F	.12	.03
	MF	.09	.03

[a]Excludes n=12 references to grandchildren.